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Women's Roles in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

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Abstract:

The diverse roles of women in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, focusing on how female characters shape moral, political, familial, and spiritual dimensions of the epics. Figures such as Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandodari, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Savitri demonstrate courage, sacrifice, intelligence, loyalty, resistance, and ethical judgment. Although these women often operate within patriarchal social structures, they are not merely passive figures; their decisions frequently influence major events, conflicts, and resolutions. The study also explores how ideals of wifedom, motherhood, duty, honour, and female agency are represented differently across the two epics. Sita embodies endurance and moral integrity, while Draupadi represents dignity, protest, and political awareness. Kunti and Gandhari reveal the complexities of motherhood, power, and responsibility. The epics present women as central to the preservation, questioning, and transformation of social and ethical values, making their roles essential to understanding ancient Indian society and its cultural imagination.

Keywords: Women, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Female Agency, Patriarchy



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1. Introduction

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are more than ancient Sanskrit epics; they are living narratives that have shaped Indian ideas about family, duty, honour, gender and morality. Their women are remembered as wives, mothers and queens, but they also question, choose, endure and resist. A study of their roles must therefore consider both the ideals imposed upon women and the ways female characters respond to those ideals (Luthra, 2014; Sutherland, 1989). These stories remain meaningful because their conflicts still resemble difficult questions faced by families and communities today. Both epics emerged through long traditions of composition, performance, translation and regional retelling. Rather than exact records of one historical period, they are layered cultural texts whose many versions have influenced Indian social imagination across generations (Ramanujan, 1991). The Ramayana follows Rama's exile, Sita's choice to accompany him, her abduction by Ravana and her rescue. Although Rama's journey structures the story, Sita's loyalty, suffering, courage and response to public suspicion provide its emotional and ethical centre. Women-centred retellings often bring her neglected perspective forward (Kishwar, 1997; Sen, 1998). The Mahabharata presents the rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas, ending in the Kurukshetra War. Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi influence the political and moral crises surrounding the conflict. Draupadi's humiliation in court particularly exposes the failure of male authority and turns her questioning into moral and political resistance (Spivak, 1981; Verma, 2015). The epics continue to shape literature, theatre, television, religious practices and everyday moral language. Sita and Draupadi remain cultural symbols through whom obedience, dignity, suffering, anger and female strength are debated (Luthra, 2014; Müller, 2024). The epics portray women within social systems governed by family, caste, kingship and male authority. These portrayals are varied: some women support established duties, while others challenge injustice through speech, choice, withdrawal or moral pressure (Chakravarti, 1993; Sutherland, 1989). Women are commonly expected to protect family honour, support husbands, raise children and preserve relationships between households. Kunti's motherhood, Gandhari's loyalty and Sita's companionship show how strongly women's identities are connected with family responsibilities (Müller, 2024). Ideal womanhood is often associated with patience, chastity, devotion and sacrifice. Yet these qualities do not always mean passivity. Sita's endurance and Draupadi's loyalty coexist with judgement, anger and self-respect (Kishwar, 1997; Sutherland, 1989). Patriarchal systems limit women's control over marriage, sexuality, mobility and public power. Sita's

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ordeals and Draupadi's treatment show how women's bodies and reputations are used to defend male honour and social order (Chakravarti, 1993; Luthra, 2014). This study explores how the epics construct womanhood while also creating space for female voices that complicate patriarchal ideals. The study examines Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandodari, Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi as distinct personalities rather than as one fixed model of epic womanhood (Sen, 1998; Verma, 2015). It analyses women's agency through open protest, questioning, ethical persuasion, endurance, strategic decisions and refusal (Luthra, 2014; Spivak, 1981). Finally, it compares the Ramayana's emphasis on marital devotion and Sita's suffering with the Mahabharata's broader range of politically active female voices, especially Draupadi's challenge to male authority (Sutherland, 1989).

2. Women's Roles in the Ramayana

Women in the Ramayana are not merely background figures supporting male heroes. They influence family relationships, royal succession, moral debates and the direction of the narrative. Although they live within a patriarchal social order, characters such as Sita, Kaikeyi, Tara and Mandodari demonstrate courage, intelligence and ethical independence. Their experiences also reveal how women's behaviour, sexuality and honour are judged more severely than those of men (Luthra, 2014; Shah, 2012).

2.1 Sita: Ideal Womanhood and Moral Strength

2.1.1 Sita as a devoted wife and princess

Sita is presented as a dignified princess and a devoted wife, but her character should not be reduced to passive obedience. Her commitment to Rama is based on personal conviction, emotional loyalty and a strong understanding of marital partnership. She repeatedly expresses her opinions and challenges decisions that exclude her from determining her own life (Shah, 2012; Sutherland, 1989).

2.1.2 Her decision to accompany Rama into exile

When Rama is ordered to leave Ayodhya, Sita refuses the safety and comfort of the palace. She insists on accompanying him, arguing that a wife must share both the happiness and hardship of her husband. More importantly, she makes this decision herself despite Rama's initial objections. Her choice therefore demonstrates determination rather than helpless dependence (Sutherland, 1989).

2.1.3 Her courage during captivity in Lanka

During her captivity in Lanka, Sita experiences loneliness, fear and repeated intimidation. Nevertheless, she preserves her emotional stability and refuses to accept herself as powerless. Her endurance in the Ashoka grove becomes a form of moral resistance because Ravana can control her physical surroundings but cannot control her thoughts or decisions (Hess, 1999).

2.1.4 Her resistance to Ravana's pressure

Sita firmly rejects Ravana's offers of wealth, authority and queenship. She condemns his conduct and remains confident that Rama will defeat him. Her resistance is significant because she confronts a powerful king while having no physical protection. Thus, her strength emerges through language, conviction and refusal rather than military force (Sutherland, 1989).

2.1.5 The fire ordeal and public suspicion

After her rescue, Sita is required to prove her purity through the fire ordeal. Although she survives, public suspicion later causes Rama to abandon her while she is pregnant. These episodes reveal a social system in which a woman is compelled to prove her honour even when she is the victim of abduction. Modern interpretations therefore question the injustice of treating public opinion as more important than Sita's dignity (Hess, 1999; Luthra, 2014).

2.1.6 Her final refusal to undergo further humiliation

When Sita is later asked to prove herself again, she refuses another public test and calls upon the Earth, her mother, to receive her. Her final departure is not simply an act of sorrow. It is also a decisive rejection of a society that repeatedly doubts and humiliates her. In this moment, Sita chooses self-respect over restoration to the royal household (Hess, 1999).

2.2 Kaikeyi: Political Power and Ambition

2.2.1 Kaikeyi as a brave queen and former warrior

Before becoming associated with Rama's exile, Kaikeyi is remembered as an intelligent and courageous queen who accompanied Dasharatha during warfare and saved him in a moment of danger. Her earlier actions show that royal women could possess military knowledge, political awareness and influence over kings (Luthra, 2014).

2.2.2 Influence of Manthara on her decisions

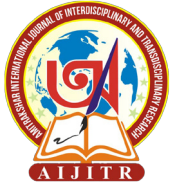
Kaikeyi initially welcomes the announcement of Rama's coronation. However, Manthara persuades her that Rama's accession may weaken Bharata's position and eventually reduce Kaikeyi's authority. Manthara's influence transforms maternal concern into political fear, demonstrating how insecurity and palace rivalry can shape personal decisions (Luthra, 2014).

2.2.3 Demand for Bharata's coronation

Kaikeyi uses the two boons previously promised by Dasharatha to demand that Bharata should become king. Her demand represents maternal ambition, but it also shows a queen actively participating in succession politics rather than remaining confined to domestic affairs (Shah, 2012).

2.2.4 Rama's fourteen-year exile

Her second demand sends Rama into exile for fourteen years. Although Dasharatha is morally distressed, Kaikeyi compels



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him to honour his promise. Her intervention changes the future of Ayodhya and initiates the central journey of the epic (Luthra, 2014).

2.2.5 Consequences of female participation in royal politics

Kaikeyi's political action produces severe consequences: Dasharatha dies in grief, Bharata rejects the throne, and Kaikeyi becomes socially isolated. Her portrayal reflects an anxiety about politically active women, since her ambition is presented as destructive. Nevertheless, her story also proves that women within royal households possessed real political agency (Luthra, 2014; Shah, 2012).

2.3 Other Significant Female Characters

2.3.1 Kausalya as a dignified and suffering mother

Kausalya experiences the pain of Rama's exile with dignity. Although deeply wounded, she does not seek revenge and represents maternal sorrow controlled by moral discipline (Shah, 2012).

2.3.2 Sumitra as a wise and supportive mother

Sumitra supports Lakshmana's decision to accompany Rama. She encourages him to treat Rama and Sita as his parents, demonstrating wisdom, emotional restraint and commitment to family unity (Luthra, 2014).

2.3.3 Urmila's silent sacrifice during Lakshmana's exile

Urmila remains in Ayodhya while Lakshmana serves Rama in the forest. Her long separation represents an uncelebrated form of sacrifice, reminding readers that heroic journeys also create suffering for women who remain behind (Luthra, 2014).

2.3.4 Mandodari as a morally responsible adviser

Mandodari repeatedly advises Ravana to return Sita and avoid war. Her unsuccessful warnings establish her as a morally responsible queen who understands the political consequences of her husband's uncontrolled desire (Narayanan, 2021).

2.3.5 Tara's wisdom and political intelligence

Tara advises Vali against fighting Sugriva and later helps stabilize the kingdom after Vali's death. Her understanding of diplomacy and political behaviour makes her one of the epic's most intelligent royal advisers (Luthra, 2014).

2.3.6 Shurpanakha as a woman punished for expressing desire

Shurpanakha openly expresses attraction toward Rama and Lakshmana, but her desire is answered with mockery and mutilation. Feminist readings regard the episode as an example of the severe punishment imposed on women whose sexuality exists outside accepted social boundaries (Luthra, 2014).

2.3.7 Ahalya's victimization, punishment and restoration

Ahalya's story varies across different versions, especially concerning whether she recognizes Indra's deception. Yet she bears the greater punishment and remains isolated until Rama restores her. Her narrative raises difficult questions about consent, victim-blaming and unequal standards of sexual morality (Narayanan, 2021).

3. Women's Roles in the Mahabharata

Women in the Mahabharata are mothers, queens, advisers and moral critics whose choices affect dynastic succession and political conflict. Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari do not merely endure suffering; they question rulers, influence warriors and expose the contradictions of dharma. Their voices frequently become most powerful when male institutions fail to provide justice (Dhand, 2004; Sutherland, 1989).

3.1 Draupadi: Honour, Resistance and Justice

3.1.1 Draupadi's birth and marriage to the Pandavas

Draupadi is born from a sacrificial fire and becomes the daughter of King Drupada. Arjuna wins her at her swayamvara, but circumstances lead to her marriage to all five Pandava brothers. The arrangement gives her a unique royal position while also limiting her personal choice (Motswapong, 2017).

3.1.2 Her position as queen of Indraprastha

As queen of Indraprastha, Draupadi manages a complex royal household and symbolizes the Pandavas' political success. Her intelligence, dignity and royal authority make her more than a wife; she becomes an important representative of their emerging kingdom (Diesel, 2002).

3.1.3 Humiliation in the Kaurava court

After Yudhishtira loses the dice game, Draupadi is dragged into the Kaurava court and threatened with disrobing. Her treatment exposes how patriarchal authority reduces a queen to property that may be gambled, insulted and publicly violated (Mankekar, 1993; Motswapong, 2017).

3.1.4 Her questioning of the legality of Yudhishtira's actions

Draupadi asks whether Yudhishtira had any legal right to stake her after losing his own freedom. Her question leaves the court's senior men unable to provide a clear answer. By speaking in legal and ethical terms, she transforms herself from an object of the dispute into its strongest moral judge (Motswapong, 2017).

3.1.5 Demand for justice and punishment

Draupadi refuses to forget the violence committed against her. She demands that those responsible be punished and reminds



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the Pandavas of their duty to defend honour and justice. Her anger is therefore not uncontrolled emotion but a sustained protest against institutional wrongdoing (Diesel, 2002).

3.1.6 Her influence on the conflict of Kurukshetra

The war cannot be attributed to Draupadi alone, because it results from succession disputes, deception and long-standing hostility. Nevertheless, her humiliation becomes a powerful symbol of Kaurava injustice and strengthens the Pandavas' determination to fight (Mankekar, 1993; Sutherland, 1989).

3.2 Kunti: Motherhood, Duty and Political Wisdom

3.2.1 Kunti's early life and divine boon

As a young woman, Kunti receives a boon that enables her to summon gods and bear divine children. Her use of the boon before marriage results in Karna's birth, placing her in conflict with social expectations concerning female sexuality and honour (Dhand, 2004).

3.2.2 Abandonment of Karna and its consequences

Fearing public disgrace, Kunti abandons the infant Karna. Her decision shapes the tragedy of the epic because Karna grows up without knowing his brothers and later fights against them. Her private fear consequently produces far-reaching political and emotional consequences (Dhand, 2004).

3.2.3 Protection and upbringing of the Pandavas

After Pandu's death, Kunti protects and raises the Pandavas in a hostile royal environment. She also accepts Madri's sons, Nakula and Sahadeva, as her own, maintaining unity among the five brothers (Sharma, 2019).

3.2.4 Guidance during exile and political crisis

Kunti repeatedly guides her sons during danger and political uncertainty. Her words encourage unity, courage and the recovery of their rightful position. She therefore exercises political influence through maternal counsel rather than official authority (Dhand, 2004).

3.2.5 Conflict between maternal love and social honour

Kunti's relationship with Karna reveals the conflict between motherhood and social reputation. She loves him but discloses his identity only before the war, when preventing conflict is nearly impossible. Her tragedy lies in understanding that the social fear governing her youth has endangered all her sons (Dhand, 2004).

3.3 Gandhari: Loyalty, Grief and Moral Protest

3.3.1 Voluntary blindfolding as marital devotion

Gandhari blindfolds herself after marrying the blind Dhritarashtra. The act may be interpreted as marital devotion, solidarity or silent protest against a marriage arranged without her full participation (Sharma, 2019).

3.3.2 Role as the mother of the Kauravas

As the mother of the Kauravas, Gandhari loves her sons but does not approve of their injustice. Her position illustrates the painful division between maternal attachment and moral responsibility (Sharma, 2019).

3.3.3 Warnings to Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana

Gandhari warns Dhritarashtra against excessive attachment to Duryodhana and advises her son to abandon hostility toward the Pandavas. Her failure to prevent war reflects not a lack of moral understanding but the unwillingness of powerful men to accept her counsel (Sharma, 2019).

3.3.4 Grief after the destruction of her family

After the war, Gandhari confronts the bodies of her sons and witnesses the suffering of widows and mothers. Her grief gives voice to the human cost of warfare, especially the devastation experienced by women who survive the ambitions of male rulers (Sharma, 2019).

3.3.5 Her curse upon Krishna

Believing that Krishna possessed the power to prevent the destruction, Gandhari curses his clan to experience a similar end. The curse transforms her mourning into moral protest and demonstrates the spiritual authority she has accumulated through discipline and suffering (Sharma, 2019).

3.4 Other Significant Female Characters

3.4.1 Amba's struggle for justice and transformation into Shikhandi

After being abducted by Bhishma and rejected by both Bhishma and Salva, Amba devotes herself to revenge. Reborn as Shikhandi, she becomes instrumental in Bhishma's defeat, transforming gendered humiliation into political and martial resistance (Sinha & Bhattacharya, 2021).

3.4.2 Subhadra's role in strengthening political alliances

Subhadra's marriage to Arjuna strengthens the relationship between the Pandavas and Krishna's Yadava family. As Abhimanyu's mother, she also connects the older generation of warriors with the future royal line (Luthra, 2014).

3.4.3 Hidimba's independence and relationship with Bhima

Hidimba independently chooses Bhima despite opposition from her brother. She later raises Ghatotkacha away from the



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Pandava household, demonstrating emotional independence and an identity not completely absorbed into her husband's family (Dhand, 2004).

3.4.4 Ulupi and Chitrangada as autonomous female figures

Ulupi initiates her relationship with Arjuna and later uses her knowledge and supernatural power to restore his life. Chitrangada remains connected to her own kingdom and raises their son as its future ruler. Both characters exercise greater geographical and personal independence than many royal wives (Luthra, 2014).

3.4.5 Savitri as a symbol of intelligence and determination

Savitri knowingly marries Satyavan despite learning that he will soon die. When Yama takes his life, she follows him and uses patience, reasoning and carefully framed requests to win Satyavan's restoration. Her victory depends not on physical strength but on intelligence, courage and verbal skill (Shah, 2012).

4. Women as Wives, Mothers and Protectors of Family Honour

Women in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are frequently defined through marriage, motherhood, and their responsibility for preserving family honour. However, these roles do not make them merely passive dependants. Their devotion often becomes a source of moral authority, emotional strength, and, at times, resistance within patriarchal families (Sutherland, 1989; Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

4.1 Women as Wives

Sita's loyalty to Rama is most clearly demonstrated by her determination to accompany him into exile. Although she is remembered as the ideal devoted wife, her decision also demonstrates courage and personal choice. She refuses the comfort and security of the palace because she believes that a wife should share both the happiness and suffering of her husband (Chakravarti, 1983; Robinson, 1996). Gandhari similarly demonstrates her devotion to Dhritarashtra by voluntarily covering her eyes after marrying the blind king. Her action symbolises marital solidarity, but it also illustrates how an ideal wife may be expected to restrict her own life according to her husband's circumstances (Black, 2007).

Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandava brothers presents a more complicated model of wifehood. She maintains the unity of the household and fulfils her responsibilities towards all five husbands, although the arrangement is made without meaningful consultation with her (Hazri, 2024; Motswapong, 2017). Mandodari remains loyal to Ravana but refuses to support his immoral behaviour. Her repeated attempts to persuade him to return Sita demonstrate that a devoted wife may guide, criticise, and morally oppose her husband without abandoning her marital commitment (Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

4.2 Women as Mothers

Motherhood gives women emotional influence, but it also exposes them to intense suffering. Kausalya's love for Rama is expressed through her grief when he is ordered into exile. As a mother, she is forced to endure the consequences of political decisions made by men in the royal household (Tyagi & Anand, 2024). Kaikeyi's demand that Bharata should inherit the throne partly emerges from concern about her son's future. Nevertheless, her maternal concern becomes politically destructive because it is shaped by fear, insecurity, and palace rivalry (Blackwell, 1978).

Kunti protects the Pandavas through exile, danger, poverty, and political conflict. She raises the five brothers as a united family and preserves their identity as members of the royal dynasty (Black, 2007). Gandhari is equally attached to her sons, particularly Duryodhana, but her inability to restrain his ambition contributes to the destruction of the Kuru family. Motherhood is therefore portrayed as a source of endurance and courage, as well as a bond capable of producing grief, guilt, and tragedy (Black, 2007; Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

4.3 Women and Family Honour

In both epics, female purity is treated as evidence of a family's honour and social reputation. Sita undergoes the fire ordeal to establish her chastity after her captivity in Lanka. The episode reveals that society demands proof from the woman rather than accountability from those who question her character (Hess, 1999). Similarly, Draupadi's attempted disrobing is not merely an attack on her body and dignity. It publicly humiliates the Pandavas and exposes the moral failure of the entire Kuru court (Motswapong, 2017).

These incidents demonstrate how women's bodies, sexuality, and personal choices are controlled in order to preserve male prestige. Men may marry several women, gamble away their families, or exercise greater sexual freedom, whereas women are expected to remain completely pure and obedient. The epics consequently preserve ideals of family loyalty while simultaneously exposing unequal moral standards that place the burden of family honour disproportionately upon women (Hazri, 2024; Sutherland, 1989).

5. Women's Agency, Resistance and Political Influence

Although epic women live within male-dominated societies, they repeatedly make important decisions, challenge injustice, and influence political events. Their agency is limited but remains visible through speech, moral judgement, strategic action, sacrifice, and refusal (Sutherland, 1989; Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

5.1 Forms of Female Agency

Sita exercises personal agency when she chooses to accompany Rama into exile. Her action fulfils the expectations of



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wifehood, but it also rejects Rama's attempt to leave her safely in Ayodhya (Robinson, 1996). Draupadi demonstrates intellectual and legal agency in the royal assembly by asking whether Yudhishtira, after losing himself in the dice game, still possessed the right to stake her. Her question exposes the conflict between marital authority, royal law, and justice (Hazri, 2024; Motswapong, 2017).

Kaikeyi uses the two promises granted to her by Dasharatha to change the succession of Ayodhya. Her actions demonstrate that royal women could influence government through their personal access to male rulers (Blackwell, 1978). Kunti manages the survival of her family and protects its dynastic continuity during repeated political crises. Gandhari also exercises moral agency by warning Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana that their greed and injustice will destroy the Kuru family (Black, 2007).

5.2 Forms of Resistance

Female resistance takes forms ranging from verbal refusal to self-sacrifice. Sita consistently rejects Ravana during her captivity and refuses to exchange her loyalty for royal comfort or physical safety (Chakravarti, 1983). Her final return to the earth represents an even stronger act of resistance. Rather than submit to another public examination of her chastity, she withdraws from a social order that repeatedly questions her dignity (Hess, 1999).

Draupadi refuses to remain silent during her humiliation and compels the royal assembly to confront its moral cowardice (Diesel, 2002; Motswapong, 2017). Amba's pursuit of revenge against Bhishma begins after she is denied marriage, dignity, and social acceptance. Although her revenge becomes destructive, it represents a sustained rejection of the authority that ruined her life (Tyagi & Anand, 2024). Mandodari's resistance is quieter but ethically significant because she challenges Ravana's abduction of Sita and warns him about its destructive consequences (Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

5.3 Political Influence of Women

The personal experiences of women repeatedly produce public and political consequences. Kaikeyi's demands change the royal succession, send Rama into exile, and create a kingdom-wide crisis (Blackwell, 1978). Draupadi's humiliation intensifies the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and becomes an enduring symbol of the injustice for which the Pandavas seek redress (Hazri, 2024).

Kunti's leadership preserves unity among the Pandava brothers, whose collective identity is essential to their political survival (Black, 2007). Gandhari's warnings offer an ethical alternative before the war, while her lament and condemnation reveal the human cost of political ambition after the conflict (Black, 2007). Marriage also serves political purposes by connecting kingdoms, securing heirs, resolving rivalries, and transforming women's marital lives into instruments of dynastic alliances (Sutherland, 1989).

5.4 Limitations on Women's Power

Women's influence nevertheless remains dependent on institutions controlled by fathers, husbands, sons, kings, and royal assemblies. Independent choices may result in exile, shame, abandonment, or violence. Draupadi speaks courageously in court, but the powerful elders initially fail to defend her. Sita's integrity does not protect her from public suspicion, while Amba finds no social or political institution willing to restore her future (Hess, 1999; Motswapong, 2017).

The central conflict is therefore between women's personal desires and the social duties imposed upon them. Epic women possess agency, but they must exercise it within structures that frequently silence them or recognise their moral authority only after suffering has produced disastrous political consequences (Sutherland, 1989; Tyagi & Anand, 2024).

6. Comparative Analysis

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata place women at their ethical centre. Although male rulers dominate public action, women often determine exile, succession, and war. Sita, Draupadi, Kaikeyi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satyawati, Tara, and Mandodari embody cultural ideals while exposing patriarchal limits (Hazri, 2024; Sutherland, 1989).

6.1 Similarities Between the Two Epics

6.1.1 Women Represent Loyalty, Sacrifice and Moral Strength

Women in both epics are admired for loyalty and endurance. Sita accompanies Rama into exile and preserves dignity through abduction and rejection. Kunti protects her sons, Gandhari shares her husband's blindness, and Draupadi survives humiliation without abandoning justice. Their sacrifice becomes moral strength rather than weakness (Motswapong, 2017; Sutherland, 1989).

6.1.2 Female Honour Is Connected with Family and Royal Prestige

In both epics, female honour is tied to husbands, dynasties, and kingdoms. Sita's chastity becomes connected with Rama's legitimacy, while Draupadi's humiliation reveals the Kuru court's moral collapse. Women's bodies become symbolic sites on which royal honour and masculine authority are tested (Hazri, 2024; Hess, 1999).

6.1.3 Women Experience Suffering Because of Male Decisions

Epic women repeatedly suffer because of male decisions. Rama permits Sita's banishment because of public suspicion, although her innocence is established. Yudhishtira gambles Draupadi without consent, while elders remain silent. Women consequently bear the results of male duty, ambition, fear, and political failure (Hess, 1999; Motswapong, 2017).

6.1.4 Female Characters Influence Major Political Events

Women shape turning points in both epics. Kaikeyi's demands cause Rama's exile and alter succession, while Sita's abduction



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leads to war in Lanka. Satyawati shapes Kuru succession, Kunti influences lineage, and Draupadi's humiliation drives events towards Kurukshetra (Blackwell, 1978; Dhand, 2004; Hazri, 2024).

6.1.5 Women Challenge Injustice Through Courage and Endurance

Sita and Draupadi resist differently but refuse moral defeat. Sita speaks firmly when doubted and rejects another public test by returning to the earth. Draupadi questions the legality of Yudhishtira's wager before the royal assembly. Their resistance joins speech, endurance, self-respect, and refusal (Motswapong, 2017; Sutherland, 1989).

6.2 Differences Between the Two Epics

6.2.1 The Ramayana Emphasizes Ideal Conduct and Marital Devotion

The Ramayana presents a comparatively ordered moral world centred on ideal conduct. Sita becomes the main model of marital devotion because she shares Rama's exile and remains faithful during captivity. Yet her suffering shows that devotion does not guarantee protection, trust, or justice within patriarchy (Chakraborti, 2022; Hess, 1999).

6.2.2 The Mahabharata Presents More Complex Moral and Political Conflicts

The Mahabharata offers a less stable moral universe in which dharma is debated and used to defend conflicting actions. Its women confront succession, marriage, sexuality, law, motherhood, and political survival. Their choices cannot be labelled entirely right or wrong, reflecting the epic's moral ambiguity (Dhand, 2004; Hazri, 2024).

6.2.3 Sita's Resistance Is Mainly Personal and Moral

Sita resists through personal choice and moral integrity. She insists on accompanying Rama, condemns suspicion, raises her sons away from the palace, and refuses to prove herself again. Her final withdrawal judges the society that failed her, although she seeks no formal political authority (Hess, 1999; Sutherland, 1989).

6.2.4 Draupadi's Resistance Is Public, Legal and Political

Draupadi resists through public argument. In the gambling hall, she asks whether Yudhishtira could stake her after losing himself. Her question challenges marital ownership, royal law, and male authority. Her anger sustains the demand for justice and connects personal violation with political responsibility (Hazri, 2024; Motswapong, 2017).

6.2.5 Women in the Mahabharata Display Greater Political Participation

Women in the Mahabharata participate directly in dynastic planning and counsel. Satyawati manages succession, Kunti guides the Pandavas, Gandhari warns rulers, and Draupadi debates honour, kingship, and revenge. Women in the Ramayana also intervene, but the Mahabharata presents a broader and more sustained field of female political activity (Blackwell, 1978; Dhand, 2004).

6.3 Critical Interpretation

6.3.1 Women Are Not Merely Passive or Secondary Characters

Epic women are not decorative figures. They choose, argue, advise, endure, condemn, negotiate, and sometimes withdraw cooperation. Even when restricted, their words and decisions redirect the narrative. Their agency should be understood within historical constraints rather than measured only through modern official power (Blackwell, 1978; Sutherland, 1989).

6.3.2 Female Suffering Reveals the Inequalities of Patriarchal Society

Sita, Draupadi, Ambika, and Ambalika reveal systems in which women's consent is secondary to dynasty, reputation, and male duty. Women repeatedly prove purity and loyalty, while male failures are defended as kingship or dharma. Feminist readings expose these unequal standards and their human cost (Chakraborti, 2022; Dhand, 2004; Hess, 1999).

6.3.3 Women Act as Advisers, Decision-Makers and Moral Authorities

Tara advises against warfare, Mandodari condemns Ravana, Kunti directs her sons, Gandhari warns Kuru rulers, and Draupadi challenges elders. These women act as moral interpreters who often recognise danger more clearly than male leaders. Their authority arises from intelligence, experience, courage, and ethical clarity (Blackwell, 1978; Motswapong, 2017).

6.3.4 Their Actions Shape Exile, Succession, Revenge and Warfare

Both epics' central movements cannot be separated from women's actions. Kaikeyi shapes exile and succession; Sita's abduction motivates war; Satyawati preserves the Kuru line; Kunti affects inheritance; and Draupadi's humiliation strengthens vows of revenge. Women do not merely suffer history; they help produce it (Dhand, 2004; Hazri, 2024).

6.3.5 Their Stories Allow Both Traditional and Feminist Interpretations

Traditional readings celebrate devotion, sacrifice, chastity, motherhood, and endurance. Feminist interpretations ask why these virtues are demanded so heavily from women and how women challenge the systems judging them. Sita and Draupadi represent cultural ideals while becoming voices of resistance, dignity, and selfhood (Chakraborti, 2022; Hazri, 2024).

7. Conclusion

Women occupy a central and indispensable position in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Their actions, decisions, sacrifices and sufferings significantly influence the direction of the narratives and the moral conflicts presented in the epics. Characters such as Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandodari, Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi are not merely secondary figures connected to male heroes; rather, they actively shape political events, family relationships, wars, exile, duty and questions of justice. Although women are frequently represented as wives, mothers and daughters, their roles extend far beyond domestic identities.



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They display intellectual strength, moral courage, emotional endurance and the ability to resist injustice. Sita's steadfastness, Draupadi's fearless questioning, Kunti's political wisdom, Gandhari's moral authority and Mandodari's rational counsel reveal women as thoughtful and powerful individuals. Even when placed within patriarchal structures, these women express agency through speech, silence, protest, sacrifice, persuasion and refusal. At the same time, their experiences expose the gender-based inequalities embedded in the social order of the epics. Women are often judged more harshly than men, denied control over their bodies and choices, and expected to protect family honour through personal suffering. Sita's trial by fire, Draupadi's humiliation in the royal court and the limited freedom granted to many female characters reveal the unequal standards applied to women. These episodes invite readers to question the relationship between duty, power, morality and gender. Their stories also show how personal suffering can become a powerful source of moral insight, public criticism and social transformation. Therefore, the women of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata remain deeply relevant today. Their struggles and achievements continue to inform contemporary discussions about dignity, justice, equality, voice and personal freedom. By examining their complexity, readers recognise that these epics present women not simply as symbols of obedience, but also as agents of courage, intelligence, resistance and ethical reflection.

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